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TECHNICAL
R E P O R T



The Collegiate Learning Assessment

Setting Standards for Performance
at a College or University

Chaitra M. Hardison, Anna-Marie Vilamovska

Prepared for the Council for Aid to Education

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SUMMARY

The Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), produced and administered by the Council for Aid to Education (CAE), is an assessment of higher education critical-thinking skills. It consists of three types of constructed-response tests, measures a combination of high-level cognitive skills, and emphasizes school-level value-added in its reports.

Although institutional value-added, or how much students improve after attending college or university, is the primary method of CLA score reporting, it is not the only possible approach to CLA score interpretation, and some questions about CLA scores cannot be addressed with a value-added methodology. For example, many schools ask: Is a given CLA score considered “satisfactory” or not? This is akin to asking for a standard or benchmark against which to judge student performance; however, no such standard is provided in CLA score reporting. Because no such standard exists, the purpose of this report is to present evidence about the effectiveness of one method that schools can use to answer this question on their own.

As with any type of test interpretation, evidence of the reliability and validity of that interpretation is critical (AERA, APA, and NCME, 1999). We therefore assembled and examined evidence of reliability and procedural validity of a standard-setting methodology that we developed and applied to the CLA.

The standard-setting study we conducted included nine panels composed of 41 faculty from participating CLA institutions across the United States. The standard-setting method consisted of three steps. First, each panel member read answers arranged in order of score. For seniors and freshmen separately and without conferring with the other panel members, each panel member identified the range of scores that he or she felt represented performance at each of the following four standards: *Unsatisfactory/Unacceptable*, *Adequate/Barely Acceptable*, *Proficient/Clearly Acceptable*, or *Exemplary/Outstanding*. Second, in groups of four to five, panel members arrived at consensus within their group on the ranges of scores that represented the performance required at each performance standard. Third, panel members sorted a set of randomly ordered, unscored essays into each of the four categories.

The results of the standard-setting process were promising. Overall, the three standard-setting steps produced similar standards for performance on average; however, we did observe variability across individuals, panels, and different CLA test prompts, as well as high unreliability in the sorting process. Based on these findings, we recommend that institutions using this standard-setting method increase the number of panels, include

multiple CLA test prompts, increase the number of responses used in the sorting step, and lengthen the time to complete the sorting step as an effort toward improving the accuracy and reliability of the standard-setting results.